

## Pencilings of the West, Number 2

***Cleveland Herald, Wednesday April 8, 1846***

We had sometimes wondered that people accustomed to all the conveniences and comforts of life in a well settled country, should have readily forsaken all these, and sought a new home in the howling wilderness. But a closer analysis of the heart of a freeman, led to a full solution of the mystery. Not that we were so ignorant of the spirit of adventure that often reigns in the hearts of the young, and leads them to court perils, merely that they may see with what grace they can escape or brave them; that spirit which Scott so happily expresses,

“Or if a . . . known, the danger’s . . .”

But we had wondered how men who had passed that age, and found the hardihood of their boyish natures . . . by gentle cares and affections, should, when not forced by absolute want, leave a home of comparative comfort, for the rude hut and the coarse fare of a backwoodsman. Yet we wondered no more when we found that it was all Freedom’s doings. The spirit of freedom is ever impelling upward, casting aside the fetters that have for centuries chained the human heart to the dust, it leaves the soul free to aspire after the most glorious destiny; and, that it may, notwithstanding its imperfections and its repeated blunders, at last gain to the highest attainable perfection, it whispers a restless discontent with any situation that in the least curbs the free will and moral agency of man.

Even the kindest intentioned restrictions of parents, who had hoped to live and die in the enjoyment of a sort of patriarchal rule, have led their sons to break away from them and seek a new home; even though, when returning in after years, laden with the wealth which has been purchased by the hand of industry, they could say with the patriarch Jacob – “With my staff I passed over this Jordan, and now I am become two bands.”

We were never more forcibly impressed with this tendency of our Free Institutions, and their heaven-directed agency, than when listening to the recital of the unpretending history of Dea. Benj. Close, of Sullivan, Lorain Co., Ohio. His father was a native of Connecticut, but many years since emigrated to Cayuga County, N.Y. He was himself a cripple, so that most of the . . . farm devolved upon his eldest sons Henry and Benjamin. After they became of age, at their father’s urgent request both remained at home, and by their united efforts, added largely to the paternal domain. For a time they felt content, but after forming new relations they began to think it no more than justice to their own families that they should possess the avails of their own industry under a title that their younger brothers and sisters could not dispute.

Actuated perhaps by a fear that they would be induced to dispose of the property if they possessed it in their own name and remove from him, their father insisted on holding the title to the estate in his own hands, promising to do justice to them in his will. This for a time partially satisfied them; but they soon began to feel themselves laboring under restrictions, which, though as sons they could have . . . with all cheerfulness, they . . . as fathers.

Benjamin at last insisted that he must leave, and seek to provide for the future welfare of his family, unless his father saw fit to convey to him a small tract of land which he could call his own and where he could, when he saw fit, erect a separate dwelling for his family. To this his father objected, and he finally went to the Holland purchase, and entered a tract of land, designing to remove his family thither on the following spring, leaving his wife and children in the meantime with his mother-in-law. Finding the country too cold and snowy to be agreeable, he sold out his article at considerable advance, and returned with the intention of proceeding immediately to Ohio – then the country of countries.

On his return, his father insisted that he should remain with him and promised to give him a deed of a part of the farm. The deed was accordingly made out, but the old gentleman, probably actuated by the fear that he would at some future time dispose of the land and remove to the West, refused to give it into his hands. Thinking it perfectly safe, Benjamin took the money he had received for his article of Holland purchase-land, and built a small house for himself, with the expectation of spending his days with his father. On inquiry he found that the deed in his father's hands was no certain security and from a sense of duty to his own family, he demanded it, that he might get it recorded. This was refused, with the assurance that it was equally safe where it was. The son felt injured, and the father attributing his anxiety to distrust of his integrity, was rather piqued, and determined to punish him for it by still keeping the deed in his own hands. "Then," said Benjamin, "I shall leave you."

The old gentleman reasoned and persuaded – did all but consent to give up the deed, and perform his first promise; but that had now become a matter of pride, and he would not yield it.

"All I ask," said Benjamin, "is that I may no longer be treated as a minor, but that I may become a man among men. As it is, I may labor all my days and my children will be treated as though dependant upon your estate. It would be doing them an injustice, and I cannot submit to your terms."

"But," inquired his father, "how will you find the means of going away? You have laid out all your money in building, and you have but a small amount of personal property."

"I can sell the house," returned the son.

"That you cannot," replied his father. "It is on my land, and I forbid your selling it."

"Then I can go without it, and I shall go without it if you refuse to let my have what is my own."

By this time the will of both parties was evidently aroused, and neither would yield to the inclination of the other. Determining to seek a home for himself, he again left his family with his mother-in-law and started for the West.

When he arrived within fifteen or twenty miles of Buffalo, he stopped to visit a relative of his wife, who strongly insisted upon his purchasing land in that vicinity. Knowing that he should have to commence anew, and judging that his family would have less hardship to endure than they would be exposed to in Ohio; he finally purchased a lot of land, and commenced work with a strong hand and a resolute heart. Late in the fall he returned to his family with the design of removing the following spring. Sometime in the winter he

returned to his purchase, but found the snow so deep that he resolved he would never remove there, and the first opportunity that presented itself, he sold out, with the determination of visiting Ohio in the spring. On his return he found his father still anxious that he should live with him, yet as unyielding as before in regard to terms.

Before Mr. Close was ready to start for Ohio, he was attacked with the fever and ague, and in a few days his wife was also a sufferer from the same disorder, which lasted most of the summer. Early the next spring he and his brother Henry started on foot for Ohio. They were well pleased with the country, and determined to take up their residence here, notwithstanding their poverty, and the hardships and privations they reasonably anticipated. In Euclid they found an opportunity to purchase on good terms, provided they could pay for it in money. Not more than a mile from this place there were some good orchards, and other comforts could be easily obtained. Hoping that their father, when he saw that they were resolute in going, would relent, and pay them at least a part of what they had justly earned, they returned home without looking farther.

He, however, thought that hardships and poverty would soon lead them to return, and utterly refused them all aid. Nothing daunted, Benjamin disposed of the little personal property which he possessed, and in June [1817] started for Ohio with his wife and their two little ones, accompanied also by his brother Henry. He had a hundred dollars due near Buffalo, the amount advanced on his purchase there, which he expected to obtain as he went through the place on his way westward. To add to the gloom of his prospects, his wife was in such feeble health that she had to be carried on a bed, and their friends all prophesied that he would bury her on the way. Her physicians, however, had assured them that the change of climate was the only thing that was likely to afford relief to her maladies, which must otherwise terminate in a rapid consumption. It was under such circumstances as these, and with no prospect of having more than a hundred and fifty dollars at most to bear his expenses and provide for his family till he could obtain a place and raise provisions, that he set out for Ohio. We did not much wonder that his father thought he would soon get starved out and return, glad to accept the terms he proposed.

His younger brother engaged to carry them to Buffalo, for which he was to have a claim of fifty dollars against his father for money due to him for labor. It was twice the amount it would cost to hire a stranger if he had been able to pay the money; but his great object now was to get away, so he did not regard the terms. The first night Mrs. Close was so much overcome with fatigue that he began to fear she would not endure the journey. The next morning she was better, and from that time she continued to improve gradually, so that by the time they arrived at their friends' residence near Buffalo, she could sit up several hours of the day.

Here they met with an unexpected disappointment. The man that owed Mr. Close was unable to pay him, and they were detained some weeks. After various efforts to arrange it satisfactorily, he paid him fifty dollars in money, and a watch which was called twenty dollars. Passage across the lake was more expensive than now, so that it cost most of the money that he had, besides the fifty dollars, to defray that item of expense. When they reached Cleveland, he learned that the fifty dollars which he had relied on for the means of living, was on a broken bank. Those who have endured such disappointment can imagine his feelings; for our part we will not attempt to portray in words what language never yet found itself capable of fully expressing. But he must appear cheerful for the

sake of his wife, and courage soon came at his call, and sustained not only the semblance, but the reality.

Leaving his wife and children with the kind-hearted Merwins, he and his brother took a short excursion to satisfy themselves whether it would be practicable to purchase in the vicinity of the lake settlements. There was plenty of land to be had for money, but no opportunity offered such as they could reasonably expect to meet, and they finally decided to go further south. In about nine days Mr. Close returned for his family, intending to take them to the residence of a cousin near Painesville. His money was so nearly exhausted that he expected the landlord's bill would cover the contents of his purse; but judge of his surprise and gratitude when he refused to take anything, on the plea that Mrs. Close had fully paid her way by sewing. The truth was, her feeble health had excited their compassion, and they had tendered her all the kindness and sympathy that they would, had she been a sister, and when she found herself able, she had insisted on helping Mrs. Merwin, hoping in some measure to compensate her for the extra trouble she had made them.

After seeing his family safely to their cousins, he started again to inquire for land. In Sullivan, Lorain Co., then we believe a part of Medina, he found land that he could article on a long credit, and money was not to be exacted in payment. The object of the landholder was to open the tract by the settlement of a few enterprising families, which would most likely lead to the speedy occupation of the whole purchase. Four families had purchased land at the center of the township, and were expected in the fall. The nearest settlement of which they learned anything was Harrisville, some fifteen miles distant, though in a year or two after they found that there were, at the time of which we speak, a few families living about six miles south.

There was no road through from Harrisville, if we except a sort of trail, partially defined by marks on the trees, which the early settlers called "blazing;" perhaps from the fact that the dark colored bark was hewn away, giving a light appearance to a spot on the trunk of the tree that could be distinguished at some distance. It was indeed a solitary spot into which to remove a sickly wife, without the means of even purchasing a cow, and with no prospect of being able to go from home a day to labor, even for the necessities of life; but what will not the courage of a freeman dare? After locating their land, they returned through Harrisville, where they found an old acquaintance who tendered him every assistance in his power. After seeing that his family were comfortably cared for, Benjamin and his brother shouldered their axes, and again set out for their purchase. At Harrisville they provided themselves with such provisions as they could obtain which consisted of a loaf of bread and a little cheese, and then proceeded to the spot which was to become their future home.

When they had approached near the township they heard bells, and in a short time ascertained that the settlers they expected had arrived. It was near night, and they met a most cordial welcome, although they had never seen each other's faces before. The newcomers had no shelter for themselves but a little cabin made of poles, and covered with bark, which had been erected by the surveyors who laid out the township, yet they as freely shared the few conveniences which their circumstances afforded, as though they had been the favored inhabitants of a regal palace instead of a greenwood canopy. Nothing could exceed their mirth and jollity, and the old trees about them awoke strange

echoes as the merry laugh went round – a meeting was theirs, quite unlike the formality of some strangers of whom we remember to have read, who, on the loftiest peak of the Alps ever trod by man, where the sublimity of nature would almost call forth a burst of admiration from the rocks themselves, turned away from each other speechless, even forbearing to give vent to those exclamations that such grandeur involuntarily calls forth – because they had not been introduced.

It was enough for our emigrants that in their loneliness they had met with human faces and heard the echo of familiar tongues. A Western pioneer never yet stooped to ask the rank of his guest. If he had a stout arm and a dauntless heart, he was welcome to every cabin, and partook of the homely cheer afforded as freely as though he had been one of the accustomed inmates. Virtues such as these have, alas! too many of them fled before the approach of fashion and formal ceremony, yet you still find them lingering in the breasts of those old men and women who can remember the times of which we speak. Heaven bless their hearts for the generous love they so often showed to the stranger, and shower its favors on the heads of their children and their children's children. May they never be exiled to a land where they hear not the voice of welcome as kindly uttered as it was by their fathers and mothers, when the door of their lowly cabin was darkened by the stranger.

But to our wayfarers. The next morning they proceeded to their location about two miles and a half from their neighbors. They soon felled trees enough to build a house, or rather a cabin, but their store of provisions being exhausted, they were forced to return to Harrisville for more bread. In a few days they were ready to raise their building, and all the men at the centre cheerfully turned out to assist them. There were seven in all, and a brave company they felt themselves. The next day the brothers set themselves to putting on the roof. They got it about half covered when it commenced raining, and rained so violently that they were forced to take shelter beneath what they had finished for the rest of the day. At night they built a fire in one end of the room, and drawing in some wet slabs, or as they were technically termed “puncheons,” they laid down on them and slept through the night. When they got up the next morning it still rained, and they had not bread enough for a comfortable breakfast for one, but with a determined spirit they set to work and in spite of the rain completed the roof.

It was near night, when hungry, cold and wet, they reached their friends at the Centre. Their wants were cheerfully supplied, and they found a comfortable shelter beneath the roof of a humble cabin that had been erected, and, as yet, served to accommodate the whole company. Leaving his brother here, Benjamin proceeded to the place where he had left his family, with the design of removing them to their new home. He had little or no current money, but they had some cloth which they disposed of, and hired a man to go and carry them and the few articles of furniture they had brought with them. On their way they passed through Cleveland, (then a small village) and again experienced the kindness and hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Merwin – kindness which they still remember with the deepest gratitude. At Columbia their teamster concluded that he could go no farther for the compensation he had received, and insisted on returning. Leaving his family again among strangers, Mr. Close started on foot for Sullivan. It soon commenced raining but thinking the clouds light he proceeded, though he was well aware that for nearly fifteen miles he should find no human habitation. It soon rained so hard that he was forced to

take shelter under the thick foliage of a huge tree. As soon as the rain slackened, he proceeded on his way; but he was frequently interrupted by the violence of the storm. At dark he was about five miles from the nearest settlement. The streams were swollen by the rains, and the swamps were overflowing with water, and added to this, the path was so illy defined, that in the darkness, he could only tell that he was right by groping for the horse-tracks that had not been entirely effaced by the rain. Some of the streams he waded, others he crossed on trees that had been felled across them in default of bridges. These he got along with well, but the swamps, which in the darkness he could not so easily get through, left their traces on his clothes, hands, face and feet, so that when he got to the house he was hardly recognized by his old acquaintance.

“Why Close! Where have you been?” said the kind hearted man, “You look as though you had been in the bottom of the swamp.”

“That I have,” returned the still buoyant man, “I made a misstep and thought I should have stayed there instead of seeing other quarters tonight.” It cost a thorough ablution to cleanse his face, hair, hands and apparel, but fortunately, water was plenty in consequence of the rain, so that by the kind care of his hostess his clothes were quite comfortable the next morning.

Proceeding to Sullivan, he found his neighbors ready to assist him, and the next day one of them started in company with him for his family. It was slow moving with an ox-team but was quite as safe a conveyance as could be obtained, and the husband felt happy when he got his family once more on the way. Their board-bill had been settled by paying a few yards of cloth, and their friend in Harrisville had agreed to lend them a few bushels of corn and potatoes, so that they felt quite relieved from anxiety.

. . .

. . . the spoil with his friend. They soon reached their home – a rude cabin without either a floor, door, windows or fire-place; and even the spaces between the logs were destitute of “chinking.” The fire was kindled against the logs, a coverlet supplied the place of a door, and some articles of clothing were hung before the places where they hoped soon to have windows. That night they spread their beds on the clay floor and laid down to rest, thankful for the rude shelter that they called their own. The wolves, attracted by the scent of the bear, howled dolefully around their dwelling, and the alarmed dogs took shelter in the house from the multitude of foes that surrounded them. But the inmates reposed securely, not even giving way to emotions of fear. The next morning, while Mrs. Close was preparing breakfast, she heard a strange voice in conversation with her husband, and looking out she saw an Indian, an object of unutterable terror to her, and she almost fainted. She had inquired of her husband if there were any living near, and he assured her there were none within thirty or forty miles. It, however, turned out that when on hunting excursions, they were in the habit of camping about a quarter of a mile east of their cabin. They were ever kind and neighborly to the newcomers and never annoyed them in the least.

In a few days the brothers had laid a comfortable floor, and secured the entrance by a stout door. At Columbia they had exchanged some cloth for window sash, and they had brought glass for a couple of windows from New York, so that their home was comfortably lighted. They had no fireplace that fall and winter, and the floor terminated

at a convenient distance from the fire, making the most convenient settee imaginable. They had turned cabinet-makers too, as the bed-steads testified, though they had only a saw and an axe with which to construct them. As soon as the dwelling was fairly habitable, they began to cut logs for another house, designed for Henry, and in the evening they worked again at chinking, hewing, and otherwise finishing the one already erected. In a few weeks they had rendered the second cabin habitable, and Benjamin's began to look quite like a palace. The windows were shaded with snow-white curtains, their two bedsteads were neatly made-up at one end of the room, and the blue chest and rocking chair, together with the fall-leaf table, furnished their dwelling in a style that must have been rather unusual at that period. Certainly their neighbors at the Centre complimented them highly upon their genteel appearance; but we should think their living unenviable. After their portion of the bear was dispatched, they were unable to procure any meat for about three months. Deer were plenty, but unfortunately Mr. Close had been deceived in the quality of the powder he had purchased and was unable to kill any game, in consequence, so that their food consisted principally of what the Yankees familiarly term "Johnny-cake", mixed with water and neither seasoned with milk, sugar or butter. Yet his wife never grumbled, nor wished she had not removed here; and the children never cried for milk nor asked for bread and butter. A part of the winter Mrs. Close was hardly able to leave her bed, and then all the care of house-keeping devolved upon him. He got up in the morning, dressed his children, baked his cake, and then went out to chopping. At noon he came in, baked his cake and shared it with his family and again resumed the axe till evening called him to his avocation of cook. His brother had returned soon after the completion of his cabin, and intended to come with his family in the course of the winter, so that there was no one to leave with his family when he found it necessary to go to mill. As it was not safe to leave them alone, he carried them to the Centre, and left them to visit there while he went to mill. Fortunately they had just commenced running one in Harrisville, so that he was only about five days in getting his milling done.

In February they were agreeably surprised by the arrival of a younger brother with his wife. They brought some presents from home which were gratefully received, among which were a cheese and a few pounds of butter – luxuries indeed after their abstemious living. The brother brought a quantity of good powder and they shortly shot a fine deer. Henry did not arrive till July of the following summer but early in the spring his house was occupied by another family that had purchased land two miles and a half farther north. They were welcomed with emotions that we can hardly imagine, for the next week after their arrival Mrs. Close gave birth to a little daughter and these unexpected neighbors seemed like ministering angels sent to aid them in their time of need.

During the winter, Mr. Close had chopped several acres, and in the spring he planted some corn among the logs and brush, and not expecting to realize anything of consequence from it; but on the fall he harvested one hundred and fifty bushels of corn. He raised potatoes to the amount of thirty or forty bushels besides other garden vegetables; so that they had an abundant supply for their immediate wants. When his brother Henry arrived, he brought with him a yoke of oxen which Benjamin used in logging off a piece of land for wheat, so that by two years from the time they removed they began to live. Their crops were abundant, and the labor of their hands was blessed. His father sent several times urging him to return, but he preferred the hardships and

privations of the life he now lived to anything like dependence. But it was not an easy matter then to raise enough to pay for his land. Wheat was low, and there was in fact no market for it at any price for a few years. Their cattle and hogs were frequently destroyed by the wild animals with which the forest abounded, and it was seven years before they could keep sheep at all. Their woolen clothes were replaced by the tanned hide of the deer long before they could keep sheep. At the expiration of six years he had not saved a dollar towards his land, and the article had expired. News came that the owner would not renew his contracts, and that the settlers were to be driven from their home. Mr. Close wrote to him, and represented their true condition and received for an answer that he had no intention of wronging them and would sooner give them the land than suffer them to leave it. This re-inspired their courage, and in four years more he paid for a hundred acres and received a deed. The second hundred acres that he purchased his father helped him pay for, feeling it to be only an act of justice. During this time they had made every effort to sustain schools and to establish the usages of good society in their community. For about fifteen years Mr. Close paid from fourteen to sixteen dollars annually for the support of schools besides his tax. It seemed almost incredible that he could have borne such hardships, and still retained such health and elasticity of spirits; but he had toiled in hope, and had realized his highest anticipations. He now seems like one scarce past the prime of life; his children like olive plants cluster round his table and, in the just enjoyment of peace and contentment, he exhibits the power of Freedom to elevate and control his destiny that in other lands would have been weighed down by poverty and cares.

H.M.T.

Pencilings came out first in the Cleveland Herald in 4 parts as follows: Pt 1 in Apr 2, 1846; pt 2 in Apr 3, 1846; pt 3 in Apr 4 1846; pt 4 in Apr 6, 1846 which was Monday. In Wednesday Apr 8, 1846, the article came out entire, and it was this paper that Dwight Close owned and was given to Mrs. Leitha Beattie by Mrs. Dwight Close. – E. A. Close